

The Deserted Village - A visit

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Part I

Kuldhara - A village in Jaisalmer

Chapter 1

Introduction

Jaisalmer is a Rajsthan city in the Thar desert adjoining Pakistan. It is sparsely populated, hosts one parliament and one assembly constituency. The climate here is extreme in both winter and summer. The temperature soars to higher than 42 degree C in summer, whereas in winter goes down to below 3 degree C. The rainfall is scanty limited to occasional showers even in the monsoon season of Indian subcontinent. The city's water requirement is normally supplemented with water supply from the Punjab. Industrial establishments are rare. People normally earn their lively hood either from quarry and stone carving, leather goods, stone pottery, hospitality industry working as drivers, guides or from riding camels. Tourists visit the city normally in winter. Jaisalmer Fort, Gadisar Lake, Kuldhara village popularly known as "the haunted village", Sam Sand dunes desert, a set havelis which are architectural wonders are major tourist attractions.

1.1 The Glorious Past

Kuldhara village once was a prosperous village. The small village is part of Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. The village is deserted now. The village was inhabited by Paliwal Brahmins, believed to have migrated from Pali¹. Historical reference² mentions that Kadhan was the first brahmin to settle in Kuldhara, who pioneered a pond named Udhansar, the remnants of which is recently excavated in the village³. The small township nearly 1.0 km x 0.25 km size shows the remnants of a wall on its north and south, the western side has man-made structures while on the east is a dry river bed of Kakni. The Kakni river branches into two streams near Kuldhara, the first is "Masurdi Nadi", and the second is a drain presently river. The township has a temple of the mother goddess Kali with its structure intact even now, whereas all other man made structures are destroyed. The temple is believed to host deities of Vishnu and Mahishaura mardini and the villagers worshiped bull and a local horse riding deity. These deities are absent now. All inscriptions in the village begin with invocations to Lord Ganesha. The villagers were Vaishnavites. Jaislamer is

¹Pali is a village in Marwar region of Rajasthan

²Tawwarikh-i-Jaisalmer written by Lakshmi Chand

³Udhansar pond

believed to have eighty five villages inhabited by Paliwal Brahmins, all of these inhabitants have deserted their villages in protest due to reasons yet unknown. The silence of Kuldhara village is louder than any body could imagine. While a section of people believe that this was due to atrocities committed on behalf of the powerful Diwan appointed by the king, others believe that this is due to an earthquake which devastated the region totally, historians believe that there is no recorded evidence in any form whatsoever of this. People have returned and resettled in all other villages except Kuldhara. A visitor to Jaisalmer always makes it a point to add this village to his or her itinerary. There is absolute nothingness here. The cursed village is reported *cursed and haunted* so that few visitors dare stay here after sunset. The Rajasthan government has made it a point to preserve the inundated village of late.

1.1.1 The government initiative

Reportedly the plans are underway to provide tourist amenities here. The fact that the village is far away from Jaisalmer is more of a challenge to the government, the absence of basic infrastructure including electricity and water being another. The Jaisalmer authorities have made it a point to indicate landmarks on stone panels everywhere. The panels indicate causes of destruction of the village and the consequent evacuation as yet to be ascertained. The local public transport facilities are very poor, except that state buses ply through a highway far away still from this tiny village. The driver pointing at a cafeteria said that the work was stalled consequent to protests from local residents. Almost all tourists resort to private taxis to visit the village.

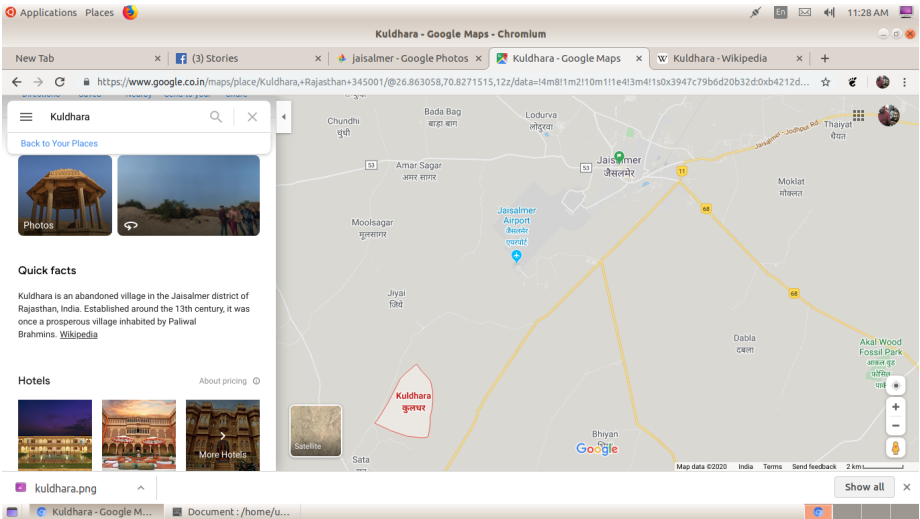
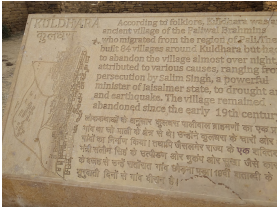


Figure 1.1: Kuldhara Village - Location Map



(a) Landmarks Panel



(b) The Deserted Village - The Descriptive Panel

Figure 1.2: The Guide Panels

Chapter 2

The Destruction

Many attempts were made in investigating the causes of destruction of Kuldhara village and the eighty four adjoining villages. The massive destruction of the prosperous village inhabited by brahmins in the thirteenth century is still a mystery. In spite of several rumors of ghosts existing in the area, few local residents trust them. The tourist guides who narrate stories weaved over such fantasies often admit that they too do not trust such stories, but their narrations are just to keep the tourists seeing the village the way they experience the village to be.

2.1 An earthquake?

A research communication¹ in "current science" goes in depth investigating the possibility of an earthquake being the destruction of these eighty five villages. The authors infer archaeoseismicity and cite a similarity of the ruined roofless structures of the region to those excavated in Harappa. They admit that this vast stretch of desert land has hidden a lot of evidences under thick sand covers, thus making investigation impossible. Their inferences based on topographic maps indicating several settlements marked as "ruins", massive disorganization of drainage channels and of straight running streams indicate earthquake being the possible cause of destruction. The authors conclude that the extensive damage done to the roofs of structures, where the incumbents stayed for long, cannot be ascribed to weathering and erosion. The authors constructed tectonic maps in consultation with the Geological Survey of India, superposed with the said eighty four villages thus inferring that these villages are not only close to the active fault lines but also to the plotted epicenters. They argue that the present-day geomorphic pattern is also indicative of the possible earth movements. The authors include a map that indicates the fault lines named Fathegarh fault, Manpiya and Ramgarh fault, Chotaro fault and Manshuria fault binding Paliwal settlements. They further opine that some Paliwal villages indicate impressions of successive terraced structures, showing uplifts or depression, augmenting their

¹Deserted nineteenth century Paliwal villages around Jaisalmer, western Rajasthan, India: historical evidence of palaeoseismicity A. B. Roy¹, *, Harsh Bhu², Pankaj Sharma² and Kishan Vaishnav² ¹Niloy Apartment, Flat 3/2G, 46A, R.N. Das Road, Kolkata 700 031, India ²Department of Geology, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur 313 001, India

assumption that earthquake caused destruction. They highlight the fact that the poor engineering used in building the walls and roofs of the houses² might have caused alarming levels of destruction, which in turn resulted in massive exodus of people. The authors conclude the article citing that the Paliwal community does not even now celebrate rakshabandhan as this coincides with the date of calamity.

2.2 On Paranormal activities

Deepika Mahendra in "News 18" story strongly believe that the village is just a deserted village, but all rumors circulating regarding its "haunted" nature is something that the local population does not believe in, and they often reassure that no ghosts were ever seen here. Tourist guides often recite such stories to tourists, but at the end of the day they submit that they do not believe in these rumors, and after all they are there to make money! Indian Paranormal Society and Jai Salmer Vikas Samiti(JVS) express contrasting views on such paranormal activities. In a weekend review of July 2016 in "gulf News"³, the author briefs on these contrasting views.

2.2.1 Indian Paranormal Society

Indian Paranormal society⁴ investigated paranormal activities especially during night. About thirty volunteers of the society spent a night there. Reverend Gaurav Tiwari, the founder of the society expressed his opinion that there is "something happening there!" which could not be explained on the basis of scientific theories: "Disembodied whispers, screams, noises are common at dark hours. Many of our members have witnessed apparitions, heard footsteps, experienced unusual touch and so on. But no one has been harmed or hurt in any of our expeditions there," he stated on the basis of this expedition. Tiwari opined that while the majority of villagers believe in the haunted nature of the village, a minority suspect a sinister motive behind branding the village thus. Some villagers still believe that a huge bounty of treasure and gold remain underneath the ruins of the village.

2.2.2 Jaisalmer Vikas Samiti

The review also quotes a school teacher, Arjun Sing Bhatti⁵ stating that he lived, did his education barely ten km from the village, and had visited the village several times after his graduation but has never experienced anything abnormal in the village. Kamal Singh Bhatti(a member of the Jaisalmer vikas Samiti JVS) is of the opinion that the inhabitants of the village, the Paliwal Brahmins, was a rich community and during their time large consignments of gold used to pass through Jaisalmer till Vasco da Gama established a new sea trade route through the Indian subcontinent. The Diwan (minister) of the then ruler imposed steep taxes on the community which they could not pay which resulted in evacuation

²The walls do not use any cementing material, and the roofs are poorly supported on logs

³Published: July 20, 2016 15:04 By Chiranti Sengupta, Special to Weekend Review

⁴Indian Paranormal society

⁵author of "Desert Teacher"

of the eighty four villages. Further to this, the minister also wanted to marry a girl from the community, and since inter cast marriages were not allowed, he had committed atrocities in the villages which resulted in the villagers fleeing in one night. Paliwals were also expert farmers who cultivated water intensive crops with their own innovative methods of water harvesting known as Khadeen which is still taught in Rajasthan schools as suitable for their desert region. This community was reportedly threatened by Mughals to leave their original place Pali in Marwar consequent to which they migrated to Jaisalmer, where they lived for more than a couple of centuries. JVS is a society working towards conserving and maintaining old monuments in Jaisalmer. JVS strongly maintains a stance against all rumors of paranormal activities in the region on the basis of several night expeditions they conducted in and around Kuldhara.

2.3 Our visit

Jaisalmer was one of our destinations in this winter tour, the others being Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Pathankot, Matha Vaishnodevi and Jammu. We reached Jaisalmer on the last day of year 2019. It was on January first that we visited Kuldhara along with Sam Sand Dunes, the desert.

2.3.1 In Kuldhara

We reached Kuldhara village entrance in a taxi by afternoon. A little reading beforehand about this deserted village was quickly supplemented by the driver's narrations. He quickly summarized the atrocities committed by the diwan which forced the villagers to flee in one night. The love story of the diwan with the girl in the village was a focal point of the narration. Earlier our guide was mentioning the Diwan Salim Singh's haveli adjacent Patwon ki Haveli with due hatred to the extent that he would not advocate visiting this traitor's haveli. Any way that haveli does not permit visitors; one can only see it from outside. His story was that the Raja ordered truncating this haveli's upper floors since it was higher than the king's palace, and the diwan was so powerful and influential even to hint the Raja that he would construct a path to the king's palace from his haveli. The entrance gate is manned, and a ticket counter issues entry tickets. Earlier our guide was mentioning the Diwan Salim Singh's haveli adjacent Patwon ki Haveli with due hatred to the extent that he would not advocate visiting this traitor's haveli. Any way that haveli does not permit visitors; one can only see it from outside. His story was that the Raja ordered truncating this haveli's upper floors since it was higher than the king's palace, and the diwan was so powerful and influential even to hint the Raja that he would construct a path to the king's palace from his haveli. The entrance gate is manned, and a ticket counter issues entry tickets. The village is highly expressive of its destruction, with all houses roofless, and walls shattered. The kind of destruction that happened reminds one that caused by an earthquake, the poor engineering method used for walls and ceilings being a major cause. Eventually, the houses that could be seen (from a distance) on way to the village also were of the same type with stacked stones locally available. Our driver incidentally was making a remark that a house might incur a cost a couple of lakhs, mainly because stones are cheap, the major cost factor being transportation, provided one avoids stone carving

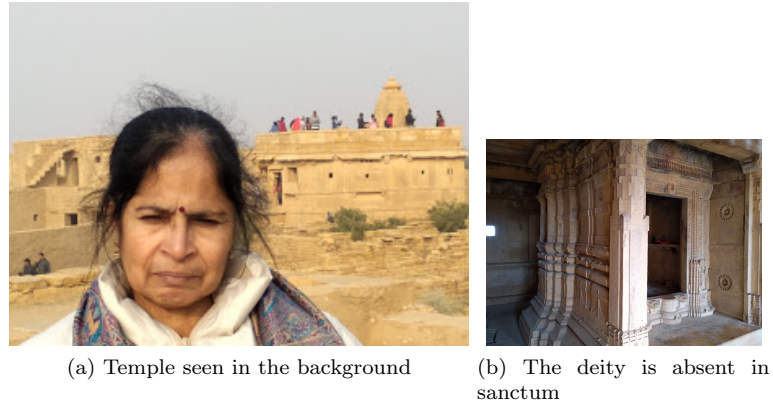


Figure 2.1: The Temple and the Sanctum

which definitely is a skilled labor, but wood is scarcely available and thus would be a major cost factor. We felt one need not worry about corrosion in a region where rainfall is a rare event. Centrally placed in the village is a temple which apparently is intact, possibly renovated. The deity is missing in the sanctum sanctorum; the rumors circulate that the fleeing Paliwal brahmins carried the deity with them. The carved stones are few in these houses unlike those in the temple. The ceilings are made of stacked logs which necessarily indicate poor engineering practice indicating the fact that an earthquake would necessarily shatter these. This aspect along with the fact that walls also are constructed with stones stacked without properly cementing them are cited as a major cause of destruction in the event of an earthquake. The street running through is

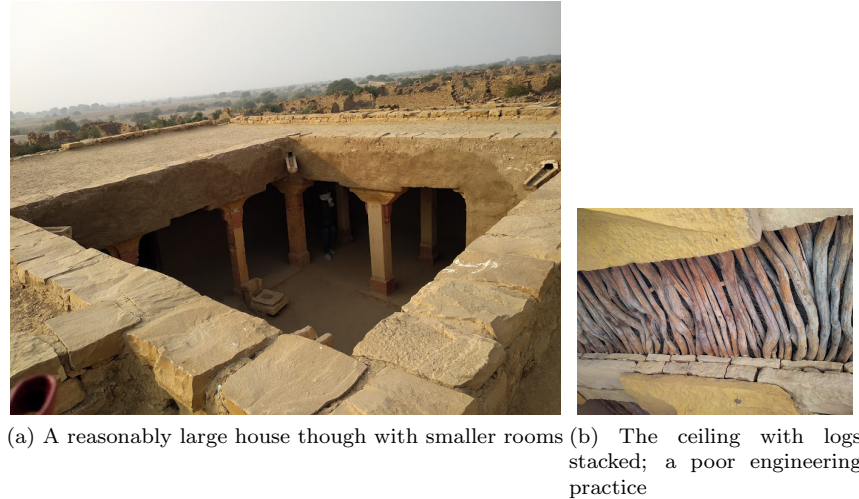


Figure 2.2: The House and its ceiling

reminiscent of a centrally planned organization, with the temple at focus. These streets are paved with locally available stones and are reasonably wide. Very few trees could be seen except the local varieties of shrubs, which eventually is

a pattern that we perceived all through Jaisalmer. Our driver ascertained that even the camels there rarely get their eatables! We failed to notice even domestic living beings here, barring a set of puppies. As was stated earlier, the engineering used in construction of houses was necessarily bad, with walls of stacked stones with no cementing, and ceilings composed of logs of wood stacked over. The village is seen protected by hills on one side and destroyed man made walls surrounding it. The river cited in the reference mentioned earlier was difficult to guess. Some houses are under renovation, and we could see laborers working.



(a) A reasonably large house though with smaller rooms



(b) Temple Street

Figure 2.3: Two Paved Streets in Kuldhara

A house is maintained as a model showing the construction details. The houses are reasonably big, though with small rooms. Very few infrastructural facilities are available here for the visitors. At face value we could definitely assert that a night stay here is not at all advisable and would definitely be problematic even for a rationalist not believing in paranormal activities. The internal roads are just left as they were paved with locally available stone. It was difficult to believe this site as one of archaeological importance in the absence of stories woven around.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

In the absence of historical evidence, it is very difficult to ascertain the truth behind the destruction of an entire region. Myths will take their way in weaving mysteries around, and one would necessarily be carried over such stories. Scientific evidence is difficult to establish in inundation of such a prosperous region currently established as a rich, cultured and self consistent village. A visit to this village necessarily allows you to fly back into the past deeper into Indian civilization and culture.

In Jaisalmer, climatic conditions are harsh. The living is difficult not for only the people but for plants and animals as well. The scanty rainfall makes farming nearly impossible. The conservation of water through construction of gigantic lakes is an attempt to win over the situation and this effort has a long history in this region dating back to the rule of Kings.

The tourism industry thrives in the winter season and offers opportunities for people to earn their livelihood but its scope is limited only to the winter season. The summer leaves people reliant on stone carving, cottage industry based on leather and weaving. The share that the poor artisans obtain from this is largely unjustified in comparison with the effort they put in. Expert stone artisans find their jobs in building havelis. We visited a haveli being constructed and is nearly half way through. The craftsmen in charge really put in their exemplary

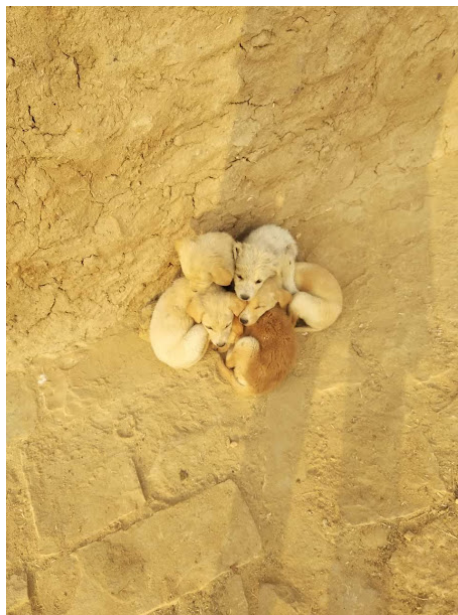


Figure 3.1: A set of puppies in deserted village

skill in carving and polishing here. Our guide mentioned that a craftsman in charge is his relative, and he earns quite a good remuneration. Our driver also mentioned that one of his brothers works in a quarry. We had an opportunity to visit a handicrafts emporium in Jaisalmer, which had exhibits textiles made from the peacock feathers, and certain varieties of yarns made from fruits like apple. The ornaments made of polished stones were elegant. The upholstery made from camel leather ranges from bags to shoes. The salesman narrated that these are manufactured in cottage industries centered around remote villages in Jaisalmer. Many versions of such handicrafts are available from street vendors at a fraction of the price that such emporiums sell them.

Jaisalmer largely depends on their water requirement on supply from their neighboring state, the Punjab. The Gadisar lake near the Jaisalmer railway station is very big and is a tourist spot. Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation(RTDC) runs an exquisite hotel "Moolmal" near the Gadisar lake. A handicrafts museum run by the Rajasthan government is located in this compound which houses a historical collection of coins, handicrafts including armory used by Jaisalmer Kings.

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